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ABSTRACT

These language testing guidelines--grouped according to the five categories of the oral language interview: grammar, comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and language utilization (communicative competence)--are presented for the language proficiency examiner. Brief guidelines for assessment are given for each of five levels of proficiency, except for language utilization, in which characteristics of high and low competence are described for seven dimensions of language behavior. Suggestions are made for weighting the five categories, selecting test formats, and preparing the examiner of self-instructional language programs. (MSE)

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THE TESTING OF STUDENTS IN SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL LANGUAGE COURSES

On the following pages, you will find guidelines for NASILP examiners which are grouped according to the five categories of oral interview testing: Grammar, Comprehension, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, and Language Utilization (Communicative Competence). In identifying a student's relative skill in comprehension and production of the target language, however, these five examination areas are not weighted evenly. While it is true that the inherent differences in the study of various languages (e.g., Spanish, say, as opposed to Chinese) which will have some effect on the emphasis placed on each testing category by the examiner, the following percentages are suggested:

Grammar	35%
Pronunciation	25%
Comprehension	20-25%
Utilization	10-15%
Vocabulary	5%

Examiners of NASILP programs, especially those not well acquainted with the self-instructional approach to language study, would benefit from viewing the NASILP video-tape, *What Did the Student Learn?*, which features examples of testing at various levels of achievement, and narrated by Professor Eleanor H. Jorden. Most NASILP member institutions should have a copy of this video-tape. Of particular interest is the illustration of testing formats, especially those based on "interpretation" and "question/response" (the latter based on either actual or created reality in the examination room). For our purposes here, it might be more useful to identify those testing formats which are generally to be avoided:

Vocabulary test, examining lexical items in isolation;
Straight translation, except when in the "interpretation" mode;
True-False or Multiple Choice; oral test rarely involve written responses;
Questions of a linguistic nature, including specific grammatical forms tested isolation;
Monologue format, based on pictures, etc.;
Straight repetition.

Since a NASILP end-of-term exam is primarily (often exclusively) oral, it is important to note that the examination is always individual -- one student at a time -- and is very seldom less than twenty minutes in duration. Indeed, tests of this type frequently require 30-45 minutes, particularly when examining students beyond the elementary level. The exam should be as natural as possible, involving real life situations as much as possible, while avoiding artificial contrivances often characteristic of such approaches as "total physical response" or the direct translation of written passages. The skilled examiner controls conversational management strategies so as to guarantee a high degree of diagnostic precision. With regard to the latter point, it is well worth noting that NASILP exams are, by the very nature of the instructional process, testing achievement (i.e., the exam is totally curriculum oriented, text-specific). Accordingly, since the examiner tests the degree of proficiency in controlling only that material for which the student is held responsible in his/her course of study, the test is specifically *not* designed as an evaluation of "performance" in any sense which transcends the specific requirements of the program of study.

Since it is important for NASILP examiners to be well acquainted with the methodology and tutorial techniques employed by the self-instructional approach to language study, the Association recommends that at least one of NASILP's video-tapes geared to this topic (e.g., *Text, Tape & Tutor*, or *The Typical Tutorial Session, etc.*) be viewed at a NASILP school which owns such video materials. Study guides for various NASILP orientation videotapes can be found elsewhere in this *Handbook*.

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GRAMMAR

Grammatical control is, of course, to be checked only in terms of patterns that have been introduced in the instructional materials. There should be a thorough check on new patterns occurring for the first time in the lessons over which the student is specifically being examined, but grammatical errors in patterns previously introduced are also noted and counted negatively.

I. **Unsatisfactory**
Student has no apparent control of any new grammatical patterns. (In this category, control of previously introduced patterns has no bearing on the rating.)

II. **Poor**
Student has at least limited control of a few fixed utterances that contain new patterns (for example, sentences from Basic Dialogues) but he/she may be unaware of the pattern as such, and may have no manipulative ability. Frequent errors in previously introduced grammatical patterns probably also occur. At this level, errors are rarely self-corrected even if brought to the attention of the student.

III. **Good**
Student demonstrates good control, even if not complete mastery, of a majority of the newly introduced structures. Other new patterns are either totally unfamiliar or, at best, very weakly controlled. Errors in previously introduced grammatical patterns may continue. At this level, errors are sometimes self-corrected, but usually only after having been brought to the student's attention.

IV. **Very Good**
Student has solid control, though not complete mastery, of all new grammatical patterns. He/she may attempt to use these patterns in inappropriate contexts. Control of previously introduced structures is also strong. At this level, errors are often self-corrected, particularly if brought to the student's attention.

V. **Excellent**
Student demonstrates mastery of all new patterns, and controls previously introduced patterns equally well. At this level, grammatical errors are extremely rare or non-existent.

PRONUNCIATION

To be tested: Competence in the production of the following categories:

1. consonants and vowels (including sequences of consonants or vowels, consonant or vowel length, etc.);
2. stress, tone or pitch according to the language;
3. intonation;
4. word-juncture phenomena (elision, epenthesis, liaison, etc.);
5. sentence rhythm and tempo.

I. **Unsatisfactory**
No control of non-English consonants or vowels or other pronunciation categories.

II. **Poor**
Tentative control of consonants and vowels and imperfect control of stress (pitch/tone); no attempt at proper intonation.

III. **Good**
Fair control of consonants and vowels, stress (pitch /tone) and major intonational patterns; imperfect control of positional variants of consonants or vowels.

Frequent errors in most categories.

IV. **Very Good**
General control of all consonants and vowels, stress (or pitch or tone) and intonation.

Occasional errors in the various categories.

V. **Excellent**
Firm and comfortable control of all distinctive contrasts in vowels and consonants ("phonemes") including variations in pronunciation according to the environment ("allophones"), and of stress (or tone or pitch) and intonation. Includes awareness of word-juncture phenomena and sentence rhythm.

Errors are sporadic or word-specific.

COMPREHENSION

The inability to comprehend utterances in the target language may result from insufficient control of phonology, grammatical structure, and/or vocabulary.
It may be a simple failure to hear the phonemes, to understand certain grammatical structures, or to know lexical items or idioms.

A lack of comprehension, also, may be a much more complex inability to put meaning together with sequences of forms which the student can distinguish (and understand) individually.

In judging the proficiency of students, distinctions must be made on the basis of the length of the utterances, their complexity, the degree to which they coincide with memorized material from the text, and the necessity for repetition by the examiner.

I. **Unsatisfactory**
Understands only a few basic utterances in exactly the same form in which they originally occured in the text, and often requires repetition even of these.

II. **Poor**
Understands most utterances in their original form without repetition. Can understand short new combinations, but often requiring repetition.

III. **Good**
Understands short new combinations without repetition, and longer new combinations with repetition and rephrasing.

IV. **Very Good**
Understands longer sequences based on instructional materials, but involving new combinations of those materials. Need for repetition is rare, but may miss nuances or details.

V. **Excellent**
Understands everything immediately, as long as only familiar grammatical structures and vocabulary are included. Appears totally at ease when listening to the target language.

VOCABULARY

Although an indirect testing of the student's control of lexical items is inherent in the examination of all language features, it is nonetheless useful to evaluate vocabulary as one of the full set of features around which the examination is structured. However, it is seldom appropriate to test for individual vocabulary items in isolation.

I. **Unsatisfactory**
Limited ability to use in familiar contexts even those items which are most heavily emphasized in the basic sentence patterns of the instructional materials.

II. **Poor**
Ability to use many newly introduced lexical items in the contexts provided in the instructional materials.

III. **Good**
Ability to use most newly introduced items in familiar contexts, and some items in new combinations. May require a brief reminder.

IV. **Very Good**
Ability to use most new (and previously introduced*) items in a range of appropriate contexts, with some difficulty evident in recall.

V. **Excellent**
Ability to use with facility all introduced lexical items in a range of appropriate contexts.

***NOTE:** Knowledge of vocabulary from previously tested material does not raise a student's grade, but failure to recall such vocabulary can lower the grade (assessment of control of the required lexical items).

LANGUAGE UTILIZATION (COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE)

Utilization: This category establishes overt recognition of the fact that the entire goal of the student's self-study program is to learn to communicate in the language being studied and, furthermore, to do so at a speed and level of efficiency that allows attention to be focused upon content rather than language forms and structures *per se*. Since utilization may be unfamiliar as a testing category to many involved in self-study programs, we will here catalog several dimensions of behavior representing a low level of utilization ability at one extreme and a high level at the other.

(1) LOW: The student seems to approach each question or utterance of the examiner as a puzzle, takes an inordinate amount of time and/or repetition to "figure it out," then slowly and laboriously constructs a response with a great amount of obvious conscious calculation.
(1) HIGH: The student immediately comprehends the examiner's utterances and responds to them appropriately, perhaps with a degree of hesitation that is natural, but not with need for obvious and lengthy calculation and conscious effort.

(2) LOW: The student can only produce items in the context of reciting the dialog or drill in which the items were learned, as a memorized rote exercise.
(2) HIGH: The student can produce the same items as appropriate responses to an interlocutor (the examiner, in the case of the exam) and thus, for example, can answer a question when asked, or return a greeting when actually greeted.

(3) LOW: The student can produce only the sentences memorized and no others, and thus, could say, for example, that the pen is *new* and the dictionary is *old* but could not say that the *dictionary* is *new*.
(3) HIGH: The student has learned to create novel meaningful utterances on the basis of the instructional materials and can produce sentences not actually memorized, yet does not produce impossible sequences through overgeneralization.

(4) LOW: The student is unable to make what he/she says correspond to the real situation, or to that created by visual aids, and thus, says that he/she is going to study lesson 9 (when actually he/she has already studied it) or that the book is thicker than the dictionary (when in fact it is thinner) or that he/she shut the door (when in fact the examiner did).
(4) HIGH: What the student says conforms to the real situation, or to that created by visual aids.

(5) LOW: The student has not learned the speech-act value of utterances, for example, reacting to a negative question in Japanese as a question rather than as an invitation when it is intended as the latter, or, conversely, trying to invite someone by directly translating the English formula "do you want to . . ." or "would you like to . . . " rather than using a negative question as appropriate. If asked to do something, the student may be confused for example as to whether he/she was asked *to do* it or asked if he/she *was going to* do it.
(5) HIGH: The student immediately comprehends the speech-act value of utterances and readily responds appropriately, for example, by accepting or declining if invited, or by opening the door if asked to.

(6) LOW: The student responds, but not in a socially appropriate manner, using, for example, forms appropriate only for members of the opposite sex, or for people in social positions very unlike his/her own.
(6) HIGH: The student shows whatever control can be expected (given the instructional material) with respect to forms indicating social position, intimacy, and so on, of speaker and addressee, and would not, for example, use forms inappropriate to own sex or rank, or would not use forms expressing great intimacy to an examiner met for the first time only minutes ago.

(7) LOW: The student has learned nothing of cultural appropriateness of responses, and thus may agree with a compliment in Chinese instead of denying it, or may tell a Thai that he found Thai food inedible instead of wonderful.
(7) HIGH: The student has learned (at least to the extent made possible by the instructional material) to alter his/her natural responses as an American speaker of English and substitute, instead, more appropriate ones as exemplified in dialogs or as explained in notes.

Utilization is a more general or global category than the others, so it may be more difficult to separate previously-covered material from newly-covered in this category. However, heavy weight should be given to naturalness of handling new items involving politeness, new speech-act values for previously learned patterns, and new greetings and other ritualistic exchanges. The students can be judged according to the following five levels.

I. The student is at the low end of the continuum on all/most of the points outlined above. He/she may be able to recite memorized material directly from the text, but is apparently unable to use it to respond to the examiner's utterances. Attempts to do so result in prolonged silences, numerous requests in English for repetition, and obvious, lengthy mental calculation. The examiner is made to feel that he/she is watching a computational process rather than having a conversation. Undoubtedly only a fraction of the exam material will be covered in the alloted time in such instances.

Level II, between I and III.

III. The student is neither consistently at the low end of the continuum of the dimensions outlined above, nor consistently at the high end. He/she is capable of some conversation and verbal interaction centering around the covered material, but obvious calculation of response is also quite evident. There is definitely, however, some ability to employ what has been learned as a *communicational device*. The examiner feels that he/she has engaged in conversation with the student, albeit a somewhat inefficient one.

Level IV, between III and V.

V. Student is at the high end of the continuum on most points most (but of course, not all) of the time. There are no grossly inappropriate responses, such as failure to return a greeting or outlandish misusages sociolinguistically, and relatively few awkward ones. The tone of the exam is smooth and conversational, and all material is covered in the alloted time. The examiner definitely feels that he/she has engaged in a conversation with the student. Mental calculation on the part of the student is absent or, at most, occasional.